**Why Reality TV Is the New Family TV**

By James Poniewozlk

Thirteen summers ago, when a pair of shows called *Survivor* and *Big Brother* first showed on television, there were uneasy cries that reality TV was ruining our civilization. Contestants were encouraged to lie and backstab one another! People were eating actual rats! What awful thing was going to be next?

Thirteen years later, you can debate how well reality TV has fulfilled its promise as the road to ruin. But I do know this: when the regular TV season ended last week and the summer premiere season started, it was an exciting time at home, because it meant *Masterchef* was coming back, and we could watch it together with our kids.

Reality TV is a big, diverse medium, of course: some of it is naughty, some of it ugly, some obnoxious, and some of it very, very good. In other words, it’s not unlike the rest of television.

**But another funny thing has happened over the past generation:** reality TV has also become the new version, and maybe the last stand, of primetime family viewing. It’s not just *Masterchef*: nearly every TV series my wife and I watch with our kids is a reality show.

We handicap *The Voice* contestants’ odds every week. The *Amazing Race* has given us a whole new perspective on airport travel. *Shark Tank* captivates the kids, and has shown me—one of the people least interested in business I know—what a fascinating process valuing a business is. *Top Chef, Chopped, Market Warriors*—if it involves cooking or selling something, we’ll watch it. Other families I know are into *Storage Wars* or *Duck Dynasty*.

Most of these are competition reality shows, which is no accident: like sports, reality shows like these are a genre of TV that can appeal to both kids’ and adult interests. Most of these series are made for adults, often without any particular goal of being entertainment for all ages.

But on their own terms, they reflect things kids are interested in: competition, creation, scorekeeping. They make performance more exciting, or they make a game out of aspects of adult life, like cooking or traveling or making money. And though “appropriate” is a relative term, they tend to do it in relatively clean terms.

**When people complain that there are fewer good TV shows** for families to watch together, it’s often assumed that means that TV has become more offensive or adult. Which of course is true in some ways, but really the overall trend is simply that TV shows have become more *specific*. We all have television shows targeted specifically to us now, children and parents alike. We actually live in a pretty great era for kids’ TV, and I’ve written endlessly here about great shows that could only exist in a time of many cable outlets and greater creativity. But most adults have little use for shows written for kids, and it will be years before I show my own kids more than the opening titles for [*Game of Thrones*](http://topics.time.com/game-of-thrones/).

And by the way, that’s fine. Like any parent now, I find choosing things to watch with my kids to be a challenge sometimes. But I don’t expect, or want, TV to recognize my particular concerns as a parent.

People sometimes assume that, because I’m a TV critic, I’m permissive about what my kids watch. Just the opposite–there are many things I watched as a kid that I would not let my own kids near. Yesterday, when news broke that Steve Forrest, star of the ’70s drama *SWAT*, had died, I was overcome with sadness, for a show that was pretty much a constant stream of heavy-weapons fire. What was I doing watching this when I was seven years old?

**I remember enough to know that the good old days were not** always as kid-friendly as we may want to think. (We recently re-watched the original *Bad News Bears*, a fantastic movie about kids—which also happens to include underage drinking.) And while I may miss *The Cosby Show,* plenty of the “family” sitcoms from my childhood do not exactly hold up well. I’m glad instead that my kids are growing up in a time that has created primetime series like *Lost*–which they can watch, later, when they’re older.

In the meantime, I’m grateful for reality TV. If it’s sending society to ruin, at least the kids and I can go there together.